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ATTENDING TO ABSTRACT THINGS

IT HAS BECOME a moderately popular pastime to accuse modern philosophy and theory, particularly Marxism, of evincing a crypto-idealist aversion to objecthood. Bruno Latour claims that the quintessential modern project is to liberate the subject from its dependency on the object, one prominent instance of which is the Marxian critique of the commodity fetish, that archetypal ‘bad object’.¹ Is materialism, then, in the grips of a religious impulse to spurn the material world and ‘attend to things invisible’—in the form of grand theoretical notions?² In fact, for dialectical materialism theoretical abstractions are necessitated by the abstraction inherent in the economic system; the commodity is regarded as *insufficiently material*, as too ‘theological’, prone to idealist pretenses. In Terry Eagleton’s words, ‘As pure exchange-value, the commodity erases from itself every particle of matter; as alluring auratic object, it parades its own unique sensual being in a kind of spurious show of materiality’.³ But this inherent duality of the commodity is not static; over time, the ‘spurious’ materiality of the ‘auratic object’ seems to become more so, the commodity becoming increasingly dematerialized and abstract. As Vilém Flusser noted, to abstract means to subtract, and specifically to subtract data from matter; throughout history, abstraction has been a movement towards information.⁴ In the ‘information economy’, capitalism has embraced a quasi-theological narrative of dematerialization, creating a need to redefine materialism that is only heightened by the turmoil in which this economy now finds itself.

Here artworks can be highly illuminating. With its ‘theological whims’, the Marxian commodity is a curious caricature of the work of art, and

conversely works of art can be seen as commodities that are as eccentric as they are exemplary. An analysis of commodification with examples drawn from art should therefore not be seen as an imposition of political or economic categories on art, but as a way to put specific qualities of art works into relief. This is not to depoliticize Marxian theory, but rather to accept that aesthetic thought—seen by Jacques Rancière as an inherently contentious conceptualization and division of the sensible realm—is always, implicitly or explicitly, political.⁵ Works of art are themselves a mute form of political economy, offering insights into the changing nature of the schizoid entity that is the commodity, which today is seemingly dematerializing itself into thin air.

Artworks and other fetishes

In 1937, Meyer Schapiro noted that ‘The highest praise of [modern artists’] work is to describe it in terms of magic and fetishism’.⁶ Some fifteen years later, Robert Rauschenberg hung sundry little arbitrary-looking objects from trees in a Roman park under the title *Personal Fetishes*. With their placement on branches, and seemingly random character, they evoked not so much Freudian sexual fetishism as (an individual version of) African religious fetishism as defined by Charles de Brosses in 1760. The term fetish was based on the Portuguese word *feitiço*, which derived from the Latin *factitius* and which was often used in Portugal to refer to ‘magical’ objects; it also came to be used for objects encountered by traders

¹ Latour’s analysis, developed in *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA 1993), has been varied in a number of writings since then. Part of Latour’s project is also to ‘save the honour’ of the fetish as a notion: see Latour, *Petite réflexion sur le culte moderne des dieux faitiches*, Paris 1996.

² ‘Wean your heart from the love of visible things, and attend rather to things invisible’. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, quoted in Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin*, Cambridge 1986, p. 33. However, time and again this transcendental impulse resulted in a proto-materialist attention to the mundane world. For all the criticisms that have been made of Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, his argument that the strongly transcendental God of radical Protestantism led to a ‘turn towards the world’, rather than a withdrawal from it, remains compelling.

³ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, London 1990, p. 209.

⁴ ‘Auf dem Weg zum Unding’, in Vilém Flusser, *Medienkultur*, Frankfurt 1997, pp. 185–9.

⁵ See Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible*, Paris 2000.

⁶ ‘Nature of Abstract Art’ (1937), in Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries: Selected Papers*, New York 1968, p. 200.

and missionaries in West Africa. On the basis of reports about African *feitiços*, De Brosses constructed a theory of a primitive phase of religion, preceding to idolatry proper, in which humans revered randomly chosen objects. De Brosses claimed that 'These divine fetishes are no other than the first material object it pleases each nation or individual to select and consecrate in a ceremony of their priests: a tree, a mountain, the sea, a piece of wood, a lion's tail, a pebble, a shell, salt, a fish, a plant, an animal of a certain species, such as cow, goat, elephant, sheep: in effect, anything imaginable of this kind'.⁷ It has been argued that this is a misconception, since the materials used in Nkisi—objects that presumably were at the basis of the Western notion of the African fetish—are laden with meaning, and are part of a 'complex system of cosmological references'.⁸ With a fine disregard for the facts, Enlightenment theory thus appropriated and exacerbated the monotheistic accusation of idolatrous materialism; here we have proto-idols that are indeed nothing but base matter. Whereas idols at least represent some deity, however illusory, African fetishes were seen as arbitrary objects without any redeeming quality: crude, primitive proto-idols.

Objects that were seen through the lens of this theory were eagerly collected, not least in avant-garde circles. The 1938 exhibition of 'African Negro Art' at the MOMA contained a 'Fetish with calabash and shells' from the collection of Tristan Tzara—a Congolese object consisting of a small anthropomorphic figure mounted on a gourd with a garland of shells.⁹ Displayed and publicized by a major museum, such an object is anything but base matter. Promoted by specialized dealers, the 'African fetish' became a brand among connoisseurs—its own commodified *doppelgänger*. When Adorno noted that of 'the work of art's autonomy . . . nothing remains but the fetishism of the commodity—a regression to the archaic fetishism from which art originated', he too implicitly posited 'African' fetishism as the truth of modern art, but with the crucial difference that archaism now resides in the value form of the commodity itself, not in any surface primitivism.¹⁰ The

⁷ Charles de Brosses, *Du Culte des dieux fétiches, ou Parallèle de l'ancienne religion de l'Égypte avec l'actuelle religion de la Nigritie* (1760), Paris 1988, p. 15.

⁸ Karl-Heinz Kohl, *Die Macht der Dinge: Geschichte und Theorie sakraler Objekte*, Munich 2003, p. 201.

⁹ James Johnson Sweeney, ed., *African Negro Art*, New York 1935, catalogue no. 489.

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, Frankfurt 1972, p. 33.

Marxian commodity fetish is no arbitrary object, nor is it necessarily—let alone purely—material. The economically progressive produces the neo-archaic.

In Marx's analysis, art constituted a marginal category that could safely be discounted, since in many respects it remained artisanal and not fully integrated in capitalist surplus production. For Marx, capitalism is based on the difference between the labour-power purchased by the capitalist and the actual labour performed by the worker. Labour-power, or 'human labour in the abstract', is a standardized quantity expressed in wages.¹¹ A craftsman working independently does not create surplus value, hence he does not generate capital. Only if he were employed in some company would this be the case; for only then would he sell his labour-power to an employer who pockets the difference between the price paid for this labour-power and the labour actually performed. While Marx realized that publishers or gallery owners functioned as capitalist entrepreneurs, he by and large considered art to be in the economic rearguard.¹² Nonetheless, as a quasi-autonomous entity ruled by an obscure logic, Marx's commodity can be read as a macabre parody of the work of art, and with the rise of the culture industry, art would in many ways become the ultimate commodity: the rearguard became the vanguard.

Art long remained exceptional because works of visual art were typically unique, rather than mass produced; this made economical analysis in terms of statistical averages such as labour-power extremely difficult. However, as mass (re)production increasingly penetrated art, and as the capitalist economy became increasingly 'culturalized', the work of art attained a status that can be called exemplary. For Giorgio Agamben, the example is a singularity that transcends the opposition of universal and particular.¹³ As singularity, an example is always also an exception; the work of art is an exemplary commodity precisely in so far as it is exceptional. As the exemplary exception, the modern *and* the contemporary work of art can serve to focus on the changing status, and even the changing nature, of the object. If modernist artists exacerbated their

¹¹ 'They [different kinds of work] can no longer be distinguished, but they are all together reduced to the same kind of human labour, human labour in the abstract'. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I (1867), London 1990, p. 128.

¹² John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Ready-made*, London and New York 2007, pp. 27–9.

¹³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, Minneapolis 1993, pp. 9–11.

works' exceptional status through the formal purification of their idioms and the creation of unique, handmade pieces, artists in the Duchampian line created artistic commodities that are exceptional not as hermetic forms of modernist withdrawal, but as reflexive meta-commodities.¹⁴ Their exception lies not in any claim to transcend the system, but in their mode of operating within in.

The absolute commodity, ready-made

With the ready-made, the artistic commodity became on the surface all but indistinguishable from 'regular' commodities, as artists became consumers buying their works ready-made. However, as John Roberts has argued, this should not blind us to the fact that these artists also *produce* value: by recontextualizing pre-existing commodities, the artist performs an act of immaterial labour which not only, as Duchamp put it, 'create[s] a new thought for that object', but in doing so also creates new value.¹⁵ Has the economy as a whole attempted to emulate this feat? Value is indeed increasingly determined by the 'social relations' between the object and other commodities; monetary value is inextricably bound with 'symbolical' value. As the work of art reveals itself to be the absolute commodity, appearance and truth switch sides and the 'archaic' proves to be economically progressive. When, decades after they were 'chosen', Duchamp's ready-mades started fetching high prices, tabloid newspapers had a field-day in attacking the 'absurd' prices paid by snobbish collectors for what are after all just urinals and bottle racks that you could buy for a fraction of the cost at a hardware store. The work of

¹⁴ Benjamin Buchloh has defined the Modernist work of art as both 'the *exemplary* object of all commodity production and the *exceptional* object of withdrawal and resistance that denies and resists the universality of that reign'; this dialectic of the exemplary and the exceptional was deconstructed in the 1960s and 1970s by artists such as Marcel Broodthaers, who realized that the integration of art into the culture industry meant that art's exceptional status had become a sham, mere ideology. See 'Marcel Broodthaers: Open Letters, Industrial Poems' (1987), in Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, Cambridge, MA 2000, p. 70. However, in a different register Broodthaers resuscitated Buchloh's dialectic of the exemplary and the exceptional, which is characteristic of the modern and the contemporary work of art, not only of a narrowly defined Modernism.

¹⁵ Roberts, *Intangibilities of Form*, pp. 21–5. That 'Mr. Mutt . . . created a new thought for that object' (the urinal-become-Fountain) is stated in an anonymous text no doubt (co-)authored by Duchamp, 'The Richard Mutt Case', in *The Blind Man*, no. 2 (1917), unpaginated.

art thus appears as supremely irrational, while the 'behaviour' of other goods on the market is experienced as natural; the work of art would then be more irrational, more purely fetishistic, more regressive than the average commodity.

According to Marx, the exchange value of a commodity *actually* reflects the amount of labour invested in it. Since the kind of labour performed by Duchamp is hardly quantifiable, his practice is perfectly attuned to an economy in which the 'corporeal form' becomes valuable not because of the work invested in it but because it incarnates a 'pure idea'. In Marx's political economy the commodity is defined as an object whose status as a *social* thing, as a product of labour, is obscured. The appearance of 'autonomous' prices, determined by the interplay of various commodities on the market, is an illusion, and value is in fact determined by the labour invested in them. If an act of consumption—a mere choice—can produce value, then the limits of the Marxian labour theory of value become all too apparent.¹⁶

When Duchamp stated that in turning a urinal into the ready-made *Fountain* he created 'a new thought for that object', he might have been giving a definition for what *operaisti* such as Virno and Lazzarato later came to define as immaterial labour. However, Duchamp's creation of 'new thoughts' also raises questions about one of their central tenets. *Operaismo* glorifies the concrete labour performed by workers as the *only* productive force, regarding the capitalist system itself as a mere parasite—it leaves the question unanswered how capitalism can unleash the productive forces in such an unprecedented way.¹⁷ In the case of the art market, of course, the artist does not produce value single-handedly, but as part of a system that includes curators and critics, not to speak of assistants and specialized production companies. This system pioneered

¹⁶ In a recent essay Diedrich Diederichsen distinguishes between the 'everyday value' and the 'speculative value' of the work of art, but everything in the economy of art conspires to collapse this distinction. It is true, of course, that the art market is speculative, and in this sense more like the stock market than that of the branded consumer goods we will be discussing further on. But it is telling that elements of speculation have entered this realm in the form of 'limited editions' that mimic the art world's economics of scarcity. See Diedrich Diederichsen, *On (Surplus) Value in Art*, Rotterdam, Berlin and New York 2008, pp. 32–3.

¹⁷ In part because of their glorification of labour, Anselm Jappe terms Negri and Hardt's work 'the last masquerade of traditionalist Marxism'. Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware: Für eine neue Wertkritik*, Münster 2005, p. 235.

the 'realization' of fetishism, calling into question the Marxian labour theory of value. So contemporary brands take their cue from art, that exemplary commodity, by making fetishism a motor of growth.

Terry Eagleton describes the commodity as 'a schizoid, self-contradictory phenomenon, a mere symbol of itself, an entity whose meaning and being are entirely at odds and whose sensuous body exists only as the contingent bearer of an extrinsic form'. That is so because the commodity is not identical to its material nature, which is merely the *pseudo-concrete* manifestation of its exchange-value.¹⁸ The schizoid fetish becomes its own dematerialized double. Effectively, the Marxian notion of the commodity fetish is a montage of Enlightenment ideas of the fetish and Romantic and Idealist theories of the symbol; if the former stood for the dumb worship of base matter, the latter transmuted the cult object into a dematerialized image. Thus the symbol prefigures the trajectory of the commodity as increasingly 'pure' image.

From Creuzer to Klein

During the 1840s, Marx studied both De Brosses's and Hegel's writings on the fetish, but the latter seem to have been less relevant for his conception of the commodity than Hegel's account of the phase which, in his system, follows that of fetishism: the culture of the symbol.¹⁹ Hegel considered African fetishes characteristic of the lowest, sub-symbolic phase of religion. As an arbitrary object worshipped for irrational reasons, the fetish does not represent anything. In the evolution of Spirit it was followed by the symbol, which marked Egyptian religion and art.²⁰ As defined around 1800, the term *symbol* usually denoted the instantaneous visual manifestations of the absolute or of an idea, a perfect equilibrium of the real and the ideal in the form of an image. Schelling considered the gods of Greek mythology to be exemplary symbols. Goethe followed suit.²¹ While Hegel shared the conception of Classical Greek art as a happy moment of perfection, he refused to characterize it

¹⁸ Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 209. The term pseudo-concrete is used by Karel Kosik in his *Dialectics of the Concrete*, originally published in Czech in 1963.

¹⁹ For Marx's readings in fetishism, see Hartmut Böhme, *Fetischismus und Kultur: Eine andere Theorie der Moderne*, Reinbek 2006, pp. 311–312.

²⁰ The symbol occurs in Hegel's philosophy of both art and of religion, in contrast to the fetish, which had no claim to being even crude art.

²¹ See Lütticken, 'After the Gods', *NLR* 30, November–December 2004, pp. 90–4.

as symbolic. By contrast, Hegel's pre-Greek, 'oriental' symbol is the *failure* of an idea to fully manifest itself in an adequate form. Hegel explains that the symbol is a 'sensuous object' that is at the same time something more than that; for instance, the representation of a lion can symbolize 'magnanimity'. The site of a conflict between content and form, the symbol is a shotgun wedding, bizarre or grotesque, between an idea that is itself still abstract and insufficiently determinate and a sensuous form that cannot fully encapsulate it.²²

This disconnection foreshadows Marx's account of the commodity as—again in Eagleton's words—"the site of some curious disturbance of the relations between spirit and sense, form and content, universal and particular: it is once an object and not an object, "perceptible and imperceptible by the senses" as he comments in *Capital*, a false concretizing but also a false abstracting of social relations'.²³ Like Hegel's symbol, the Marxian commodity is a failed encounter between form and content, in which the commodity's status as a representation (of social relations) is *obscured*. If the Hegelian symbol is a mythical connotation grafted onto a primary representation, the commodity owes its magical, quasi-autonomous appearance to a disavowal of this primary representation. In his *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker*, which saw several editions in the decades after its debut in 1810, Friedrich Creuzer also noted the symbol's 'incongruence of essence and form', between a highly charged content and a comparatively simple expression.²⁴ However, Creuzer did *not* see this as a reason to disparage the symbol; on the contrary, he used it as the basis for a romantic glorification of the symbol. After all, are dark intimations of profundity not much more intriguing than clear statements or narratives?²⁵

²² Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, vol. I (1817–1829), Frankfurt 1986, pp. 393–466.

²³ Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 208.

²⁴ 'The symbol became significant and uplifting (*erwecklich*) precisely because of this incongruity of essence and form, and by the over-abundance of its content in relation to its form'. Friedrich Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*, vol. IV. 3, Leipzig and Darmstadt 1843, p. 530. In this third German edition, which started publication in 1836, the theoretical part of Creuzer's work closes the last volume as an appendix. In Guigniaut's version it opens the first volume, as it did in the original German edition of 1810–12.

²⁵ Creuzer contrasts the obscurity and mystery of the symbol with the banality of allegory, and in his view *myth* is fatally allegorical. The original symbols, which were quite crude signs for the cosmic or telluric powers early humans worshipped,

Creuzer exploits a fundamental ambiguity in the notion of the image. On the one hand, there are images executed in material media (and the more physical the medium, the more easily suspect of idolatry). On the other, there are mental images and visions devoid of a material support. Like other Romantics and Idealists, Creuzer rather slyly assimilates the former to the latter. When he mentions statues, these objects are as it were only the material reflection of symbols, and they have value in so far as they are symbolic. Symbolic forms are 'corporeal' only incidentally. *Mystic symbols* convey the problematic nature of any contraction and visual manifestation of the absolute, whereas in the *plastic symbols* of Greek art the gods become beautiful.²⁶ The early Artemis of Ephesos, a fertility idol covered with breasts and other symbolic attributes, in time became the beautiful hunting goddess known from classical Greek sculpture. This transition can be studied in Creuzer's illustrations; his work is copiously adorned with engravings belonging to the culture of austere line drawing, of which Flaxman's illustrations of Homer are a significant early example. The allure of this style of outline drawing lay in its purifying effect; it abstracts from the concrete until disembodied forms remain, subtly spiritualizing and dematerializing historical artifacts. In the realm of visual art the outline drawing seemed as close to the sphere of pure ideas as one could get. Whether primitive, oriental or classical, in Creuzer's illustrations the images of the gods are cleansed. It is not that they lack details, just that all details shown are *necessary* details. This visual cleansing prepares the gods, both in their early and in their late incarnations, for Creuzer's symbolic reading.

The Hegelian symbol is spirit trapped in matter; the symbol's sensuous, material form is not adequate to its idea. But it is this insufficiency that makes symbols potentially sublime, as they transcend their sensuous body. Fundamentally, Creuzer agrees: symbols reflect the 'world of ideas' through a medium that dims their light.²⁷ However, in practice he does

were later transformed into anthropomorphic gods. As these gods accrued elaborate myths, the instantaneous symbol was increasingly replaced by the allegory that unfolds over time. Creuzer thus valorizes the instantaneity of the image over the narrativity of language.

²⁶ Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker*, vol IV. 3, pp. 534–5.

²⁷ See Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, vol I, pp. 393, 415–6; and Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker*, vol. IV. 3, p. 530: 'While on the one hand, it [the symbol] radiates down from the world of ideas and can thus be called sun-like, to use a Platonic expression, on the other hand it is dimmed by the medium through which it reaches our eye'.

not focus on the medium's materiality, nor does he dwell that much on the discrepancy between idea and form. It is thus not surprising that the French translation of Creuzer's *Symbolik* boils his notion of the symbol down to the simple formula: 'Pure ideas, clad in corporeal forms, such are properly speaking symbols'.²⁸ Here the issue of inadequacy is dropped, and the 'sensuous object' becomes an unquestioned manifestation of the transcendent idea. In any case, matter doesn't really matter; a divine symbol can be executed in any number of physical media, what counts is the image as a sensuous form hovering between matter and idea.

Thus Creuzer's symbol prefigures the 'branded' commodity, in which the brand is visualized in a logotype which is in turn stamped on a variety of objects. Naomi Klein notes that such commodities have become 'empty carriers for the brand they represent. The metaphorical alligator, in other words, has risen up and swallowed the literal shirt'.²⁹ Thus the commodity is imprinted with a suitably Egyptian representation that symbolizes Lacoste-ness. The Lacoste crocodile relates to the shirt—or indeed to the archetypal fetish that is the shoe—as a Creuzerian divinity to its support in stone or wood. This becoming-symbol of the commodity is a logical outcome of commodity fetishism. The (commodity) fetish is always already a symbol of itself, its own spectral double. The 'symbolic' value of the commodity, which at first was the systemic effect of production relations and was then consciously masterminded by logo-design and branding, develops a dynamic of its own that turns the illusion into a reality. In the age of branded and expensive 'designer water', symbolic value indeed becomes exchange value. Becoming-crocodile is the name of the game. At the same time, it must be noted that the commodity-symbol radically exposes the differential and arbitrary character of Creuzer's symbols; whereas Creuzer's symbols laid claim to a Platonic essence, the commodity is a semiological desublimation of such idealist theories of symbolism.

Duchamp to Baudrillard

One can see this desublimation at work in Duchamp's ready-mades and, more explicitly, in surrealist objects. The 1936 exhibition at the

²⁸ The quotation is from Guigniaut's French version: 'Des idées pures, revêtues de formes corporelles, tels sont proprement les symboles . . .' Creuzer, *Religions de l'antiquité, considérées principalement dans leurs formes symboliques et mythologiques*, vol I, Paris and Strasbourg 1825, p. 26.

²⁹ Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, London 2000, p. 28.

Galerie Charles Ratton included both ethnographica—the gallery’s speciality—and Marcel Duchamp’s bottle rack, signalling that ‘archaic fetishes’ and modern ready-mades were equally important models for the surrealist object.³⁰ At this show, Duchamp’s *Bottlerack* (alternatively titled *Hedgehog*) entered into a dialogue with Dalí’s even more explicitly phallic *Aphrodisiac Jacket*—a dinner jacket covered with glasses of crème de menthe with straws in them. Duchamp had already turned his chosen objects into doubles of themselves through the act of selection, which makes one look for ‘family resemblances’ between them (as well as between them and non-ready-mades by Duchamp), by the addition of punning titles and his production of texts in general. With their eye-catching semiotic permutations and recombinations—telephone meets lobster—Dalí’s *objets à fonctionnement symbolique* made the ‘semiologization’ of the object in Duchamp’s art more explicit.

The object became a focus of activity for the Surrealists at the time of their uneasy affiliation with the French Communist Party, which also resulted in the anti-colonial exhibition of 1931; the production of tangible objects seemed one way of countering accusations of idealism or dreamy escapism.³¹ After all, in them subjective desires are objectified, made tangible. Breton quoted Hegel to the effect that the art object lies ‘between the sensible and the rational. It is something spiritual that appears as material’.³² Thus Breton anticipated the rhetoric of contemporary capitalism, according to which commodities are almost accidental materializations of a transcendent brand identity.

Freud had stripped the symbol of its idealist trappings by redefining it as a contingent sign that needs to be decoded by reconstructing processes of censorship and displacement. It is these differential symbols that Dalí imprinted on his objects, abstracting them from the complex interplay of symbol and symptom, turning them into trademarks. One of Dalí’s objects takes the archetypal sexual fetish, the shoe, as its point of departure. In the shoe is a glass of milk above which a sugar lump with an image of a shoe is dangling; other sugar cubes are stored by

³⁰ Dieter Daniels, *Duchamp und die anderen: der Modellfall einer künstlerischen Wirkungsgeschichte in der Moderne*, Cologne 1992, pp. 219–20.

³¹ For the difficult relation between the Surrealists and the French Communist Party, and the role of the Surrealist object in this relationship, see Steven Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics and the Psyche*, Cambridge 2004.

³² The quotation is at the beginning of Breton’s ‘Situation surréaliste de l’objet’ (1935), quoted in Harris, *Surrealist Art*, p. 153.

the heel of the shoe. For Dalí, the dipping of the shoe sign into milk evoked an Oedipal return to the mother, a loss of self by lacteal baptism. While Dalí's shoe seems to anchor his symbolism metonymically in the body, the reproductions of the shoe in the lumps of sugar suggest that shoes and everything else become uprooted signs in a perpetual game of recombination. In the end, such objects would above all become logos for the Dalí brand—the birth of the branded commodity from the spirit of Surrealism, with special thanks to Marcel Duchamp.

In 1970 Marcel Broodthaers, perhaps the most truly Duchampian of post-war artists, had gold bars stamped with an eagle form part of the 'Section financière' of his *Musée d'Art Moderne, département des aigles*. The eagle, which Broodthaers traced from ancient art to modern advertising as a symbol of power and empire, became here a logo for Broodthaers' own practice, and what Rosalind Krauss has termed the 'eagle principle' of conceptual art: what is general—the concept—takes precedence over what is materially or visually specific.³³ Broodthaers determined that his gold ingots should be sold for twice the market price of gold, the surplus representing the value added by its status as art. By farming out production to low-wage countries in the post-colonial empire of global capitalism, labour-power can be purchased for prices that are unrelated to the wages in the countries where most of the products will be sold. For branded goods, expensive advertising campaigns are necessary, but if successful their exchange value actually comes to be in part determined by their relations with other brands: for instance, as between the crocodile and the swoosh—or the eagle.

Around 1970, Baudrillard—who was already diagnosing fundamental changes in capitalism—supplemented the categories of use value and exchange value with his concept of sign value. In this way, he effectively theorized an economy in which the circulation of sign value *creates* exchange value. While Baudrillard noted that exchange value is based on 'equivalence' and sign value on 'difference', the latter was at the service of the former: the difference between Brand A and Brand B is expressed in prices that are subject to the law of exchange, hence of equivalence.³⁴ One could say, with Baudrillard, that we have moved from production to

³³ Rosalind Krauss, 'A Voyage on the North Sea': *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London 1999, pp. 9–20.

³⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, Paris 1972, p. 64.

reproduction, that the material goods now reproduce their own image. With his eagle 'logotype', Broodthaers announced a situation in which the material commodity is now the reproduction of a brand logo, a de-symbolized symbol commanding prices that are barely related to the labour invested in the object.

Recent upheavals in energy and food prices, not to speak of looming ecological disaster, suggest that matter comes back to haunt 'transcendental' capitalism. But while it is important to expose the dirty little secrets of an idealist capitalism—its reliance on processes of pollution and forms of labour largely denied representation, just as workers themselves are often denied elemental rights—this desublimating task should not go hand in hand with a fetishization of some tangible reality that predates and remains distinct from capitalism's drive towards abstraction. For this drive results precisely in the becoming-real of abstraction and in a *materialization* of the conceptual, of the immaterial.

Symbols and logotypes

In the end, all genealogies of the symbol seem to end in practices of radical de-symbolization. In the twentieth century, the symbol became increasingly formalized, and freed from tradition and convention. With Kandinsky, its meaning came to lie exclusively in its graphic and chromatic characteristics. Mondrian argued that the universal must not be imprisoned in all too particular forms, since art can be a '*direct plastic expression of the universal*' only if such surface symbolism is left behind. Using the term 'symbol' in a negative way, to denote conventional meanings embodied by circumscribed forms, such as the Christian cross, Mondrian disparaged symbolic art. Yet a phrase like '*direct plastic expression of the universal*' is very much in keeping with idealist definitions of the symbol as the absolute, or an idea manifesting itself in a form and so creating a synthesis of the ideal and the real.³⁵ Abstract art creates a new plastic expression by juxtaposing colour and line, horizontal and vertical, outwardness and inwardness, nature and spirit, individual and universal, female and male; it gives a determinate or concrete expression to the universal by combining 'purified' forms and colours in rhythmic compositions.

³⁵ Piet Mondrian, 'The New Plastic in Painting', in Harry Holtzman and Martin James, eds, *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, Boston 1986, pp. 45–6, 49.

In the 1940s, a loose group of American artists including Newman and Rothko formed what Clement Greenberg described as a 'new indigenous school of symbolism'.³⁶ Newman argued that the pre-war European modernists such as Mondrian had still been too naturalistic by circumscribing the absolute in measurable forms (a criticism of his work that Mondrian would naturally have rejected). Real symbols needed to break beyond such geometrics. They needed to be both abstract and sublime—hence expansive. This symbolic aesthetic was threatened by practices that seemed to collapse art into the spectacle. Newman argued that Duchamp's ready-mades had helped to create a situation in which museums 'show screwdrivers and automobiles and paintings' without making a fundamental distinction between them. Duchamp's ready-mades and the designs of 'Bauhaus screwdriver designers' both claimed to be art, and they were thus two manifestations of the same fundamental problem.³⁷ Against all attempts to blur the boundaries, Newman maintained, in thoroughly Creuzerian fashion, that '[the] God image, not pottery, was the first manual act'.³⁸ Newman pits the symbol against the fetish, Creuzer against De Brosses. The symbol's entanglement with the commodity is denied: it becomes the true domain of art and of 'man', withstanding a capitalist culture decried as materialist and positivist.

In spite of efforts by various symbolist and abstract artists, the twentieth century saw the definitive demise of the dream of the symbol as an anti-idol, an instantaneous form of sensuous knowledge. As Adorno put it, 'Art absorbs symbols by no longer having them symbolize anything . . . Modernity's ciphers and characters are signs that have forgotten themselves and become absolute'.³⁹ This development can already be seen in Newman's work, in which the relationship between the paintings' titles

³⁶ Clement Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of Hedda Sterne and Adolph Gottlieb' (1947), in John O'Brien, ed., *The Collected Essays and Criticism 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949*, Chicago 1986, pp. 188–9.

³⁷ Barnett Newman, 'Open Letter to William A. M. Burden, President of the Museum of Modern Art' (1953) and 'Remarks at the Fourth Annual Woodstock Arts Conference' (1952), in John O'Neill, ed., *Selected Writings and Interviews*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1992, pp. 38, 245. Intriguingly, Duchamp's 1918 painting *Tu m'* contains the shadows of a number of known ready-mades as well as that of a screwdriver.

³⁸ Newman, 'The First Man Was an Artist' (1947), in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 159.

³⁹ Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 147.

and Newman's idiom of colour planes and vertical 'zips' is anything but transparent.

By the 1960s younger artists like Frank Stella would distance themselves from all symbolic pretensions. Stella's permutations were much more systematic than those of Newman, working through formal options in one series after another. One critic noted the collusion of such art with the rigidity of corporate innovation when he observed 'how often recent American painting is defined and described almost exclusively in terms of internal problem-solving . . . The dominant formalist critics today tend to treat modern painting as an evolving technology wherein at any moment specific tasks require solution—tasks set for the artists as tasks are set for researchers in the big corporations'.⁴⁰ The results also *looked* corporate—serially executed in industrial paint, with compositions that recalled nothing so much as post-war logotypes, equally centralized and geometric. Logotype means *word form*; the logotype suggests that it is the symbolic apparition of a transcendental logos or idea. Caroline Jones, comparing Stella's *Sidney Guberman* (1963) to the 1960 logo for the Chase Manhattan Bank, noted that in the post-war years corporate logotypes were increasingly simplified, moving 'away from narrative and toward iconicity', so as to 'form a visual imprint, as if *branded* on the retina'.⁴¹ If Creuzer's symbolic gods prefigured the branded commodity, Stella's quasi-logotypes drive home the point that the commodity's realization of Creuzer's idea can only occur if the radical contingency of Creuzer's beloved symbols is acknowledged and exploited through the calculated permutation of arbitrary signs.

Materialists have always insisted on the social reality of the fundamental abstraction that is exchange. Was the commodity not always pseudo-concrete, abstract to the core? On what basis can one posit a narrative of *increasing* abstraction? If the seemingly completely physical commodity is really abstract to the core, abstraction itself is a concrete reality. Guy Debord noted that 'the abstract nature of all individual work, as of production in general, finds perfect expression in the spectacle, whose very

⁴⁰ Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, New York 1972, pp. 77–8.

⁴¹ Caroline Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Post-war American Artist*, Chicago 1996, p. 162. In speaking of forms 'branded on the retina', Jones was paraphrasing Stella himself.

manner of being concrete is, precisely, abstraction.’⁴² It is thus *exchange*—of labour as a commodity for wages—that creates the real abstraction of relations between pseudo-concrete commodities. In a process that is as liberating as it is destructive, capitalism extracts people and goods from feudal social bonds, replacing them with the abstract bond of exchange value. As Adorno emphasized, the ‘universal implementation’ of exchange in capitalism abstracts from qualitative aspects of the relation between producer and consumer, reducing all relationships to abstract links of exchange.⁴³

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx criticized Hegel’s fallacy of ‘conceiving the real as the product of thought concentrating itself’; after all, ‘the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind. But this is by no means the process by which the concrete itself comes into being’.⁴⁴ However, as conceptual abstraction moves from philosophical notions to the mathematical abstractions of modern science, and from the blueprints of industrial technology to the programs of the digital age, it becomes increasingly operational and transformative.

Is branded capitalism just a quasi-idealist dissimulation of this reality of abstraction, a camouflaging of the rule of equivalence with the play of different brand ideas? It would be a mistake to think that identifying exchange as ‘real’ abstraction is sufficient reason to dismiss all consideration of recent transformations of capitalism. In an age in which objects are digitally designed and tested in simulations, does the real not indeed become ‘the product of thought concentrating itself’? Hegel has rightly been criticized, by Adorno and others, for completely assimilating reality to the concept; for Hegel, the concept or ‘notion’—*Begriff*—is ‘the truth of being’, as an active principle that manifests itself objectively.⁴⁵ While Hegel regarded such notions as determinate rather than abstract, to posit that the concept is ‘the truth of being’ is to relegate what cannot be subsumed under it to the realm of mere appearance, of contingency. If this

⁴² Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle*, Paris 1967, p. 30.

⁴³ Adorno, ‘Gesellschaft’ (1965), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 8, Frankfurt 1972, p. 13. See also Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic*, London and New York 2007, pp. 35–42.

⁴⁴ Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, London 1993, pp. 100–2.

⁴⁵ Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*, vol. I (1830), in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 8, Frankfurt 1970, p. 304.

operation is not one of abstraction, then what is?⁴⁶ Yet it may be argued that in advanced capitalism, conceptual abstraction itself becomes concrete. The abstract reality of the contemporary spectacle is twice-born.

Abstraction, concretely

Early twentieth-century abstract art was an unstable compromise. Its pioneers used a militantly spiritualizing rhetoric, claiming to leave behind the 'materialistic' modern world in order to inaugurate the 'epoch of the great spiritual' (Kandinsky) with their abstract symbols. Yet for the most part they remained loyal to the stubbornly material medium of easel painting, which implies a conservative protest against the onward march of abstraction, a decision to confront the concept with its refuse, with corrections and imperfections, with blotched and botched areas of paint. Even though Mondrian opened his groundbreaking 1917 essay with the statement that 'life is becoming more and more *abstract*', he took care to point out that his art stands 'between the absolute-abstract and the natural or the concrete-real. It is not as abstract as abstract thought, and not as real as tangible reality. It is aesthetically living plastic representation: the visual expression in which each opposite is transformed into the other'.⁴⁷ In spite of Mondrian's Hegelianism—mediated through Bolland, the Dutch Hegelian philosopher—he refused to leave the debris of the material world behind.

It is telling that in the 1930s, many abstract artists—though not Mondrian—came to prefer Van Doesburg's term 'concrete art' to 'abstract art'.⁴⁸ The reasoning behind this term—that abstract forms are in fact primarily concrete and sensuous—at first glance seems to sit oddly with the rather more sterile and mathematical look of *art concret* à la Max Bill or Richard Paul Lohse, which if we compare it with Mondrian looks *programmed* rather than composed by traditional means. In fact, in the 1960s and 1970s artists associated with the *art concret* tradition would be among the first to embrace computers for art-making, inaugurating the

⁴⁶ 'It is not merely that the object, the objective and subjective world in general, ought to be congruent with the Idea, but they are themselves the congruence of concept and reality; the reality that does not correspond to the concept is mere appearance, the subjective, contingent, capricious element that is not the truth'. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II*, in *Werke*, vol. 6, Frankfurt 1969, p. 464.

⁴⁷ Mondrian, 'The New Plastic in Painting', pp. 28, 36.

⁴⁸ For *art concret*, see Jonneke Jobse, *De Stijl Continued: The Journal Structure (1958–1964): An Artists' Debate*, Rotterdam 2005, pp. 220–5.

triumph of the abstract concept turned operational code. We are thus not dealing with concretion understood as the opposite of abstraction. Rather, what is at issue is the becoming-concrete of abstract thought itself, which becomes the 'truth of being' by not only assimilating but actively transforming the material world to an unprecedented degree.

In a way that is quite close to *art concret*, in Sol LeWitt's work from the 1960s and 1970s formal abstraction becomes the permutation of simple elements: lines are combined in various ways until their possibilities are exhausted. Rather than making specific compositional choices, LeWitt established parameters that function as a program to generate forms. In the late 1960s, when LeWitt characterized the idea as a 'machine that makes the art', he was effectively mimicking the corporation's attitude towards its patents and brands, which are 'machines for making products'—the latter perhaps farmed out to others, just as LeWitt would soon have assistants all over the world.⁴⁹

The conceptual art of the 1960s, which LeWitt helped to define, seemed to promise a 'dematerialized' art beyond the object.⁵⁰ In recent years, a number of authors have analysed the implication of such conceptualism in an economic regime of post-Fordism and immaterial labour, one in which 'abstract thought'—as Paolo Virno put it, paraphrasing Marx—'has become a pillar of social production'.⁵¹ In other words: conceptual abstraction itself becomes increasingly operative and concrete, in the process largely leaving behind language as the master medium of abstraction. In becoming software that can be sold over and over again, the concept itself becomes currency. Conversely, information technology has enabled the abstraction of the money sign not only beyond gold, but also beyond paper. In the process the concept becomes concrete and operational, as

⁴⁹ For an analysis of LeWitt's linking of idea and machine in his 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' (1967) within the context of the post-Fordist economy, see Sabeth Buchmann, *Denken gegen das Denken: Produktion, Technologie, Subjektivität bei Sol LeWitt, Yvonne Rainer und Hélio Oiticica*, Berlin 2007, pp. 48–54.

⁵⁰ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1997.

⁵¹ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Los Angeles and New York 2004, p. 63. The authors who have written most cogently on conceptual art in this context are Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, Cambridge, MA 2003, and Sabeth Buchmann, *Denken gegen das Denken*. See also texts by Leen Bedaux relating recent discourses on conceptual art to the literature on immaterial labour and post-Fordism.

the operational concept is the ultimate commodity—the ultimate currency. This is what Baudrillard's notion of sign value announces, even if it was still to some extent predicated on older industrial models. In the digital age, it is not so much that objects are transformed into signs, into their own quasi-symbolic doubles. Producing them becomes a matter of programming, which is to say a semiotic operation, from the start.

Perhaps history can be graphically represented as the merger of different lines of abstraction, and of abstraction's concretion. In advanced capitalism, concept and coinage reveal their historical complicity as 'abstract thought' itself becomes as concrete as exchange. With an ironical nod to the 'actually existing socialism' of the old Soviet Bloc, one might call this merger of two forms of real abstraction—of monetary and conceptual abstraction—'actually existing abstraction'. It is to us what the alleged socialism of the Warsaw Pact was to its subjects: our horizon.

Always aestheticize

Taking cues from Baudrillard's exploration of sign value, theories of postmodernism in the 1980s often diagnosed and criticized an 'aestheticization' of capitalism: the economy was becoming culturalized as the commodification of art was completed. But what appears as an aestheticization can also be seen as an *impoverishment* of the aesthetic. Proper aestheticization must entail a refusal to limit the notion of the aesthetic to the play of commodified pseudo-symbols, and instead brings it to a wider set of questions pertaining to the sensible—including the (in)visibility of labour conditions and ecological costs. For it is not that the reign of sign-value must be iconoclastically smashed in order to resurrect some state of normality. Rather, what is needed are interventions in the complexity and contradictions of signs, to question the conditions under which their programmed surfaces came into being. If we reverse the perspective suggested by quasi-idealist narratives, that of a capitalism abstracting itself from the constraints of matter to such a degree that commodities become the practically indifferent bearers of transcendental corporate ideas, the commodity comes to be seen as doubly concrete, as the convergence of two trajectories of the incarnation of abstraction. Thus 'Platonic' contemporary commodities contain a potential for materialist practice.

To what state of affairs does a crocodile-adorned label stating that the shirt or shoe was 'Made in Peru' actually refer? Various organizations already try to raise consumers' awareness of their banks' investments; if one bank invests heavily into destructive industries, why not switch to a bank that is demonstrably 'cleaner'? Obviously, the danger is that this remains a merely cosmetic operation, while business goes on as usual. We are only experiencing very tentative beginnings of such a politics of visibility, which is constantly sidetracked and diverted into discussions about 'product pirating' and intellectual copyright, or moralizing reports about child labour that seem designed to evade the structural issues. Yet here, in the political aesthetics of things, lies the greatest chance to arrive at a revolutionary contestation of (and in) the circulation of commodities. After all, if the project of 're-routing the trajectory of things', to use David Joselit's phrase, is to be more than mere *feng shui* to keep contemporary capitalism healthy, it would in the end have to amount to change that is drastic enough to merit the term revolution.⁵² The rearranging of the furniture would have to be radical indeed.

In art, the exacerbation and exploitation of surplus value à la Hirst or Koons is now only of limited analytical interest. What matters is the development of commodities that point beyond self-celebratory capitalism. These would be inverted ready-mades that are no longer content to create artistic surplus-value, but rather investigate the conditions for a different type of thing, one that is no longer taken as a quasi-natural 'matter of fact', but as a political 'matter of concern'—to use terms by Bruno Latour that are rather closer to Marxism than their author likes to acknowledge.⁵³ If the surplus-value production of ready-made and surrealist objects anticipated branded capitalism, the question is what anticipations of a different economy might look like. While socially and ecologically sustainable modes of production, distribution and consumption are urgently needed, this break should not be seen in primitivist terms.

Proper materialism cannot be content to privilege more pseudo-concrete industrial products over more purely abstract informational commodities, let alone dream of a return to gift economies. If moments occur of that temptation, it is all the more imperative to go beyond such nostalgia.

⁵² David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy*, Cambridge, MA 2007, p. 5.

⁵³ Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Winter 2003), pp. 225–48.

It is crucial that the creation of things out of objects is not seen as some move towards a more 'real' and less abstract society. If the things to come will strip off the commodity's pseudo-concrete appearance, this is in order to *set free abstraction* from its current constraints. This is why the diagrammatic plays such an important role in contemporary artistic practice, both in the form of actual diagrams (from Stephen Willats and Hans Haacke to Mark Lombardi and Bureau d'études) and in more indirect manifestations.

Allan Sekula's photo series, writings and films since his *Fish Story* project chart the abstract structure of global capitalism. Sekula seeks to counter two interrelated manifestations of fetishism: the disavowal of the material conditions of commodity production and distribution, and the 'spiritualizing' discourse of a post-industrial condition and the informatization of the economy. A lecture diagram by Sekula—a thoroughly un-Creuzerian line drawing—depicts a hierarchy of commodities: the top layer of 'consumer goods' is most visible to the eye above, particularly branded goods like the Disneyfied Winnie the Pooh dolls whose travels from manufacturer to consumer Sekula and Noël Burch traced in a film script.⁵⁴ The two layers underneath, including 'raw materials' at the bottom, are all but invisible, and it is this invisibility—as well as that accompanying production and distribution of seemingly hyper-visible branded goods, of quasi-symbols like Pooh—that Sekula seeks to counteract. But one or more layers should perhaps be added to Sekula's diagram, *above* the eye, above the 'classical' commodity-image. All these levels interact. The current financial crisis has also thrown the market for Sekula's 'raw materials'—the commodity market—into turmoil; while these commodities are apparently pure material concretion, they are at the same time their own digital-monetary doubles, changing value and ownership according to transactions in a global data network.

In September 2008, the *Guardian* quoted Pulp singer Jarvis Cocker's gleeful remark that 'It's really nice seeing capitalism getting its come-uppance', since capitalism had progressed beyond the understandable level of 'companies that make real products' to that of 'organizations that just make money . . . that's abstract capitalism, it's beyond most ordinary people—and I include myself among them. I mean, you see the FTSE

⁵⁴ Sekula's diagrams were made during a lecture/discussion event with Sekula and Noël Burch on the occasion of their film script/project 'A Forgotten Space', 21 November 2003.

index, or whatever, running along the bottom of the TV screen and generally it just doesn't impinge at all on the way you live your life, and then suddenly you're told your life is going to take a nose-dive. Who understands that?'⁵⁵ Who indeed? Certainly, attacking the 'abstract' nature of hyper-capitalism does nothing to further anyone's understanding of it. Are dodgy mortgages and stock the products of a hyper-advanced capitalism? Their basic structure is hardly some radical post-industrial innovation; if they, like all financial transactions, undergo a qualitative change when they become available and accessible online, the effect is to underline that such interwoven abstractions are entangled in the concrete affairs of daily life, and so are answerable to social and political demands.

Materialism can never mean nostalgia for Brossean shells, for some primitive 'real'. In their mystificatory Platonic register, the quasi-symbols of branded capitalism have shown the reality of abstraction as the proper subject for analysis. Beyond these objectified signs, non-object commodities too must be transformed into matters of concern, into social issues open to political intervention and re-routing. 'Attending to things invisible' takes on a new meaning in this context, when the invisible logos has become a purposive rationality that informs every pore of material culture. If there is any future at all, it will be abstract.

⁵⁵ Stephen Moss and John Henley, 'Crunch Time', *Guardian*, 17 September 2008.